

SILVERMAN THOMPSON

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PRESS RELEASE

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Former Student-Trainee of National Federation of the Blind Files Lawsuit as a Repeat Victim of Sexual Assault as a Minor *National Federation of the Blind's Alleged Systemic Failures Led to a Culture of Sexual Abuse of Program Participants*

(Baltimore, MD) - In a detailed account of alleged repeated sexual assault at the hands of a **National Federation of the Blind** (NFB) associate while enrolled as a minor in a training program, **Alyssa Mendez** (20) and her legal counsel today filed a 4-count lawsuit against the NFB for alleged systemic failures that enabled alleged repeated sexual assault against her and other NFB students, and which allegedly perpetuated a culture of abuse against the vulnerable and a lack of accountability by "the oldest and largest nationwide organization for blind Americans." The NFB is headquartered in Baltimore City.

"Alyssa Mendez seeks accountability by the National Federation of the Blind leadership for its alleged repeated failure to protect her and others from allegedly known sexual predators working for and acting on behalf of the NFB and its affiliated organizations and who allegedly have been allowed to continue in positions of responsibility and authority, despite alleged specific and credible accounts of abuse by program participants made known to those at the highest level of the NFB," said **Steven D. Silverman**, Managing Partner of Silverman, Thompson, Slutkin & White. "We encourage others who have similarly been victimized by NFB's alleged failure to enforce its own code of conduct and purported protocols for preventing sexual abuse to also come forward to demand accountability beyond apologies, and to insist that NFB provide clear evidence that its culture has changed, and vulnerable individuals are no longer at risk."

In 2018, while enrolled as a 16-year-old trainee in the NFB's 2-month affiliated program in Ruston, Louisiana aimed at assisting her and other blind individuals to develop skills for everyday living and to encourage independence, **Alyssa Mendez's** lawsuit details her account that she was repeatedly sexually assaulted by then 23-year old **Michael Ausbun**, an NFB member, Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB) intern, and vice president of NFB's National

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Association of Blind Students division. Despite alleged complaints to NFB's leadership, which included photos demonstrating Mr. Ausbun's inappropriate behavior towards Ms. Mendez, the NFB allegedly failed to address the sexual abuse and, as a result of its persistent negligence, allegedly allowed the abuse to continue. Despite Ms. Mendez's mother informing NFB's leadership of Mr. Ausbun's repeated sexual assaults in 2018, NFB leadership allegedly chose not to contact authorities or exact any punishment, and instead allegedly allowed Mr. Ausbun to continue participating in high-profile NFB events, putting other program participants at risk of significant harm.

According to the legal complaint, only after Ms. Mendez came forward on her own to report Mr. Ausbun's sexual assaults (the third such complaint with respect to Mr. Ausbun) did the NFB finally launch an investigation of the matter. Based on investigation findings and conclusions, the NFB temporarily suspended Ausbun for five years, allegedly allowing him to return to the organization provided he met undisclosed, confidential guidelines. The NFB's so-called "punishment" for the repeated sexual assault of a minor allegedly provides startling evidence of its disregard of the legitimate and serious harm Ms. Mendez and others allegedly suffered at the hands of NFB personnel while enrolled in NFB programs and while attending NFB-affiliated events.

In a 2020 "Open Letter of Apology," **NFB's President, Mark Riccobono**, acknowledged that NFB failed to deliver on its obligations to provide a safe environment for vulnerable persons under its care. Following Riccobono's admission, NFB created a Special Committee to investigate sexual assault and other abuses within NFB and its affiliated organizations, and which were occurring during NFB events and programs. The Special Committee generated a report confirming that sexual assault of NFB members was widespread, and that NFB had failed to adequately address complaints of sexual abuse and punish wrongdoers. According to the Committee's Interim Report, issued prior to its Final Report of November 11, 2021, the NFB received 69 complaints, alleging a total of 55 incidents just in the period between December 2020 and July 2021. Moreover, the NFB acknowledged a longstanding network of former NFBL members who received warnings about staff within the group and other men associated with it who were considered unsafe and potential predators.

On the day that Mr. Riccobono issued his Open Letter of Apology, hundreds of individuals signed an ["Open Letter on Sexual Misconduct and Abuse Experienced through Programs of the National Federation of the Blind and National Blindness Professionals Certification Board."](#) The original signatories of the letter claimed to be "victims, survivors, and witnesses of sexual and

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psychological abuse at programs, conventions, and blindness rehabilitation centers affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind...”

Ms. Mendez’s complaint, filed in Baltimore City Circuit Court, asserts the four counts of **(1) Battery, (2) Negligence, (3) Negligent Hiring, Training, Supervision, and Retention, and (4) Violation of Requirements to Report Suspected Abuse of a Child Under Maryland Code Ann., Family Law § 5-701, et. seq.** The full complaint is available [HERE](#)

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